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FOR NEA/ELA AND DRL/NESCA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KIRF](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: COURTS FINE PRO-GOVERNMENT NEWSPAPERS IN LIBEL
CASES

REF: A. 08 CAIRO 2452

[B](#). 08 CAIRO 2405

[C](#). 08 CAIRO 2280

[D](#). 08 CAIRO 2199

[E](#). 08 CAIRO 2198

[F](#). 08 CAIRO 2152 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: ECPO Mincouns William R. Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

[1](#)1. (C) On December 21, 2008, a Cairo court ordered the pro-government paper "Al-Ahram" and one of its journalists, Gaber Asfour, to pay 50,000 Egyptian Pounds (8,000 USD) in compensation to Sheikh Youssef El-Bedry for characterizing El-Bedry as a "terrorist" in an August 2007 article. The "Al-Ahram" article labeled El-Bedry as a "terrorist" in response to his suit against a secular poet, Ahmed Moataz El-Hegazi, who allegedly insulted El-Bedry in one of his poems. Hafez Abu Seada, Secretary-General of the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, told us that the court bowed to pressure from Islamists supporting Sheikh El-Bedry as part of a campaign against secular intellectuals, such as the "Al-Ahram" journalist Asfour. Moataz El-Feigery, Executive Director of the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, commented to us that many judges are religiously observant themselves, and are therefore sympathetic to sheikhs such as El-Bedry.

[1](#)2. (C) On January 7, a Cairo appeals court ordered Mohammed Ali Ibrahim, editor-in-chief of the pro-government newspaper "Al-Gomhuria," to pay 50,000 Egyptian Pounds (8,000 USD) in compensation to Court of Cassation Judge Mahmoud Mekki for damaging Mekki's reputation. The court found that the paper reported inaccurately that Judge Mekki participated in the May 2007 Doha Forum on Democracy and Political Reform in the Arab World, which "Al-Gomhuria" described as hostile to Egypt. In fact, Mekki did not attend the forum. "Al-Gomhuria" had also published another article alleging that Mekki held a 2007 meeting with other judges to plot a coup d'etat against the GOE. Hisham Kassem, founder of the leading independent newspaper "Al-Masry Al-Youm" commented to us that the GOE had little political interest in either of these two cases, and therefore simply allowed the courts to make independent decisions. Kassem noted that it is "somewhat unusual" for courts to rule against pro-government papers.

[1](#)3. (C) Comment: Recent court decisions against journalists have targeted the independent press for insulting the government or establishment figures (reftels). In November 2008, a district attorney decided not to file charges against three pro-government papers for violating the gag order on the case against regime insider Hisham Talaat Mustafa for murdering Lebanese pop singer Suzanne Tamim, while the government ordered the trial of journalists and editors from two independent papers, scheduled to begin January 22, for publishing similar information (ref A). The court decisions against two pro-government papers may serve GOE interests by

diluting somewhat the recent series of judgments against the independent press, with the false implication that libel verdicts are apolitical, targeting any paper that violates the law.

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